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Perhaps the most persistent and widespread theory around the Women's Movement today is that of patriarchy. It takes many different forms but the ideas behind it – that male domination or sexism is something which exists not just as a product of capitalism but as something quite separate from the capitalist mode of production and which will endure beyond capitalism – are accepted so widely that a wholesale rejection of the theory is greeted with complete and genuine amazement.

Such theories contain little understanding of how women's oppression and the nature of the family have changed historically. Nor is there much notion of how widely differing that oppression is from class to class. Instead we are presented with the "eternal truth" that "patriarchy" in one form or another is the cause of women's oppression.

This is justified by pointing to the existence of women's oppression in societies other than those of western capitalism – in the class societies that predated capitalism and in the so-called socialist societies of Russia, China, Cuba, Eastern Europe and so on.

The patriarchy theory backs up the notion widely accepted within the women's movement that there has to be a separation of struggles, socialism and the workers' movement fight capitalism, the women's movement fights a separate struggle against patriarchy. The logic of the separation of the struggles now is the separate social development of each sex in the future. This is a logic which many people who espouse the patriarchy theory would not accept. But if patriarchy is indeed something by which all men oppress all women, how can it ever be overcome by women and men acting together?

I want to argue something completely different. I want to reject the concept of patriarchy as at best a muddled term simply mean women's oppression (in which

case it cannot explain this oppression), and at worst a completely idealist notion which has no basis in material reality. I want to show that it is not men who “benefit” from the oppression of women but capital. I want to look at the way in which the family has changed, and how as it has changed women’s conception of themselves has also changed. Hopefully that will demonstrate that women’s continued oppression is not the result of male conspiracy (or an alliance between male workers and the capitalist class), but of the continuation of class society in every part of the world. It follows that I shall argue the “socialist” countries have no more in common with socialism than they have with women’s liberation.

Finally I want to consider the question which is always thrown at socialists. Engels and the early Marxists considered that the proletarian family (unlike the bourgeois family) would disappear since it was not based on property. It clearly has not. Since I do not believe that this is because of patriarchy, I want to look at precisely what does keep the family going.

## **Various forms of the theory**

The joy of the patriarchy theory is that it can be all things to all people. It thrives on the “vague feelings” so beloved by sections of the women’s movement, rather than on a materialist analysis. Consequently, even searching for a definition of the term can be difficult, since there are so many to choose from.

Patriarchy can for instance refer to a specific society where the father (the “patriarch”) ruled not only the women in the family but also the younger men. Such a society depended on peasant or artisan production based at least partly in the home. The patriarch’s power derived from his possession of the wealth produced and his ownership of land. But in most cases such an historically specific society is not what is meant by the term. Even the vaguest of patriarchy theorists can see that we do not live in such a peasant society today, and their concern is to deal with present day women’s oppression.

The prevalent versions of the theory take two forms.

First there are those who see patriarchy purely in ideological terms. Juliet Mitchell for instance, sees a strict demarcation: “We are dealing with two autonomous areas, the economic mode of capitalism and the ideological mode of patriarchy.”<sup>1</sup> Sally Alexander and Barbara Taylor put similar arguments in *In Defence of Patriarchy*.<sup>2</sup>

Such a separation of the economic and ideological has to be queried. There is always a connection between the economic basis of a society and the ideas which

arise within that society. The two cannot be seen as autonomous spheres. As Marx long ago pointed out, if you see history as just the result of the dominance of ideas or of a succession of ideas, then you cannot explain anything about the development of society. For why do some ideas dominate? And why do dominating ideas change?

If we reject the religious notion of women's position as being ordained by a (male chauvinist) god, then we have to look for the material conditions that have led human beings to act in certain ways in relationship to the world and therefore to each other. The origins of women's oppression have to be sought in these, just as the origins of any other social phenomenon. Then we can understand the way in which the ideas that justify that oppression have arisen and engage in a meaningful fightback.

What Marx wrote in 1845 applies as much to women's oppression as to anything else in our society: "We do not set out from what men say, imagine, conceive nor from men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh. We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life process. Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence. They have no history, no development: but men, developing their material production and their material intercourse alter, along with their real existence, their thinking and the products of their thinking. Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life."<sup>3</sup>

By contrast, to see patriarchy as an "ideological mode" is to see ideas as sustaining themselves. The struggle for the liberation of women then ceases to be linked to the struggle against material exploitation which can tie in with the mundane concerns of millions of working women and men. Instead it becomes what Alexander and Taylor call for – a cultural struggle to change people's ideas in isolation from changing society. It is easy to see from this how ideas about the autonomy of the women's movement develop. If ideas are autonomous from economic exploitation, why not fight against women's oppression autonomously too?

Some women have recognised a contradiction here, and so have tried to develop, more recently, materialist theories of patriarchy. They argue that men (all men) benefit from women's oppression, and that they are able to do so because of the fundamental biological differences between the sexes. Here lies the basis for patriarchy. As Roberta Hamilton puts it: "The feminist analysis has addressed itself to patriarchal ideology, that patriarchal mode which defines the system of male

domination and female subjugation in any society. But [the ideology]... is predicated on biological differences between the sexes, giving it a historical basis of its own".<sup>4</sup>

Christine Delphy puts forward such a materialist argument from the point of view of radical feminism in *The Main Enemy*.<sup>5</sup> A similar attempt, but using Marxist categories has been made by Heidi Hartmann<sup>6</sup>. It is this I want to look at, at some length. If these sorts of arguments can be shown to be faulty, then the whole attempt to combine "patriarchy theory" and Marxism falls to pieces.

## **Are men the exploiters of women?**

Hartmann defines patriarchy as "a set of social relations between men, which have a material base, and which, though hierarchical, establish or create interdependence or solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women." She further argues that "the material base upon which patriarchy rests lies most fundamentally in men's control over women's labour power... [it] does not rest solely on childbearing in the family, but on all the social structures which enable men to control women's labour". "Control is maintained by denying women access to necessary economically productive resources and by restricting women's sexuality".<sup>7</sup>

In denying women access to these economically productive resources, men form an alliance with capital. Evidence for this is cited in the development of capitalism, and the working class response to its problems in the form of demands for protective legislation and the family wage. The argument goes that both were fought for by male workers in order to benefit them by putting women into the home where they could both service men and be controlled sexually by them. But is this view of events true?

The development of capitalism in Britain had the effect of destroying domestic production and of forcing women and children, as well as men, into the factory system. This had a devastating effect on the reproduction of the working class. Infant mortality reached horrific levels, due (as Marx showed in *Capital*) to mothers working long hours away from home. Children were left with slightly older children, or minders who often neglected them or kept them quiet with gin or laudanum. When they grew old enough to work machinery they too were pulled into factory production. As Marx put it: "the mighty substitute for labour and for workers, the machine, was immediately transformed into a means for increasing the number of wage-labourers by enrolling under the direct sway of capital every member of the worker's family, without distinction of age or sex."

The conditions described here by Marx, and by Engels in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*<sup>8</sup>, show how horrific the early factory system was. The impact of the new system pulled the old pre-capitalist family apart, as each member of the family became wage labourers. Capitalist exploitation did, however, despite its brutality lay the basis for the men and women of the propertyless class, the proletariat, to be equal. Both had to rely on wage labour, and men had lost their property. That was why Engels made such a distinction between the bourgeois and the proletarian families. The tendency seemed to be for the working class family to cease to exist. In that, Engels was right.

But what he didn't appreciate was the impact that the factory system had on the very process of reproduction. In Manchester, probably the most advanced centre of factory production, there were 26,125 deaths per 100,000 infants under one year of age<sup>9</sup>; treble the mortality rate in some non-industrial areas. The most far-sighted members of the ruling class could see that the system's future supply of labour power was being destroyed.

It was out of these conditions that the demand for protective legislation and the family wage came. They fitted in with the changing needs of capitalism but were also in part due to the real concerns of working class men and women for better standards of living, safer pregnancies, healthier children and cleaner homes.

Theorists of patriarchy like Hartmann argued that men allied with capital to exclude women from certain jobs. There were it is true attempts at this. Skilled craft workers used their unions to exclude women from some trades. But it was not only women they excluded. The children of unskilled workers and of immigrant workers could stand as little chance as women of getting apprenticeships in such trades and the exclusion then was of anyone who had not "served their time". It is stretching the notion of "patriarchy" to absurd limits to make it mean as Hartmann does, "white male supremacism" – and it would be beyond absurdity to make it fit the historical facts by being "white skilled male supremacism" which discriminates not only against all women and all immigrants, but against most "native" workers as well.

What is more, some of the most important areas from which women were excluded were ones where the unions were weak or non-existent and in no position to exclude anyone. The legislative exclusion of women from certain industries was carried on by bourgeois parliaments. But was that really the alternative posed? Firstly the working class (male) was hardly the brilliantly organised monolithic class that Hartmann pretends. The majority of workers were not even members of unions. For a long period after the decline of Chartism they hardly fought at all for demands of a generalised nature. They accepted the ideas and framework of

capitalism including the dominant ideology about women. One can hardly expect them to have fought for greater socialisation of childcare when they were fighting for little else.

Secondly, there was the problem for working class women of the danger and frequency of childbirth. Today in virtually every advanced capitalist country women are refusing to have many (if any) children. Our access to contraception, however inadequate, is something completely undreamed of until our generation. To those women there was no alternative to a lifetime of frequent and often unwanted pregnancies other than abstention. To working class people of both sexes childbirth was a fact of life, and in such circumstances they usually both wanted the woman to be protected. This explains in a much more satisfactory way than any theory of male conspiracies why it was women who left the factory at marriage and why the family wage was a wage for men.

It is still a fact that these moves dealt a blow to women's chances of overcoming their subordinate social position. Capitalism had presented the potential for equality, but that equality could not come to fruition within the system. In the interests of the reproduction of labour power, women were isolated and atomised in the home. Their work was seen as serving their husbands and their families. They were denied financial independence. This "ideal" was never the reality for all working class women; many always engaged in wage labour. But the ruling ideas propagated the notion of the family as sacred, projecting the stereotype of the bourgeois family on to the working class as a means of ensuring reproduction. And the stereotype was what working class women and men accepted as the "norm" even if it did not match their own personal reality.

Even today, as the development of capitalism has drawn the majority of women into the labour market, this view of women has not disappeared although it has been severely eroded. Attitudes to women, and of women to themselves, have advanced enormously under the combined impact of control over contraception and entry into the workforce. The way changed material conditions have changed attitudes is itself an argument against seeing oppression as the result of some mystical male ideological hold that never changes.

Hartmann argues that men benefit from women's labour in the home. She asks: "Who benefits from women's labour? Surely because the conditions in those industries was seen as harmful to the creation of the next generation of workers (either directly, where pregnant women were working with processes that could harm foetuses or indirectly, where they were working hours that prevented them playing their part in the socialisation of their children). The motive force for

exclusion did not lie with “patriarchal men”, but with capital’s view of its own long term needs.

The theory that the family wage – a wage paid to the man sufficient to keep not just himself but his family as well – was a capitalists, but also surely men, who as husbands and fathers receive personalised services at home. The content and extent of these services may vary by class or ethnic or racial group, but the fact of their receipt does not. Men have a higher standard of living than women in terms of luxury consumption, leisure time and personalised services”.<sup>11</sup>

Now of course it is true that women bear the brunt of childcare and housework in the home. But does it follow from that that men “benefit” from women’s labour? The division of labour is after all a division of labour where men do different work, both in the factory and in the home. But to say that welding is better or worse than housework is to look at both in completely subjective and unmeasurable terms. The same is true of leisure. Men have more rigidly defined leisure which tends to be social (the pub, football) just as they tend to have more rigidly defined working hours. But it cannot be simply said to be more – it is different.

Housework, by definition, is work that is not subject to the tempo imposed by capitalist exploitation in the factory or the office. It does not involve intensive effort for a certain number of hours, followed by a period of recuperation in order to allow application of another fixed spell of intensive effort. Therefore there is no way the amount of labour that goes into it can be measured against the amount of labour that goes into factory work. All that can be said with certainty is that both factory work and housework are debilitating -one leading to occupational diseases (which is why symptoms such as chronic bronchitis are much higher among male workers than among housewives), horrific accidents, acute fatigue and often, an early death; the other to demoralisation, atomisation, insecurity, and a variety of ailments that are normally ignored by doctors. The great disadvantage that housewives suffer is not that they are somehow exploited by men, but that they are atomised and cut off from participation in the collective action that can give the confidence to fight back against the system.

In fact, the problem of “benefits” only really arises where there is a departure from the old stereotype division of labour between the “male worker” and the female “housewife”. As married women are increasingly drawn into the employed labour force, many women find themselves doing fulltime paid labour yet still expected to run the home. They are left with much less time to recoup their labour power than their husbands as they have to combine work and house work. Yet even in these instances it is doubtful if the husbands benefit in more than a marginal way. The most tiring and debilitating aspects of housework are those connected with child



care. The great “parasite” on women’s domestic labour is the child. Yet it is not the husband who benefits from the child’s existence, but capital which thereby is guaranteed a future source of surplus value. Just because the woman suffers a double burden of both directly producing surplus value in the factory or office and of reproducing future sources of surplus value in the home, it does not follow that the male worker’s single burden is less.

I would argue therefore that not only do men not benefit from women’s work in the family (rather the capitalist system as a whole benefits), but also that it is not true that men and capital are conspiring to stop women having access to economic production.

We live in a period where more women work in most advanced countries than in any other period in history. The jobs they do differ from men, in that sense the sexual division of labour is as alive as ever. And their pay is far from equal. This is because women still (usually) have their working lives interrupted by childbirth (although much less so than a couple of generations ago) and are still expected to play the major part in caring for the children as well as work.

But the structure of women’s jobs has more to do with the period of capitalist development in which they entered the labour force (the expansion of the service sector in particular) than with any male conspiracy. This is particularly clearly shown if you compare the jobs women have with those of immigrants of both sexes. Both are concentrated (with a few exceptions such as foundry workers) in cleaning, transport, catering, light manufacture, food processing, because both entered the workforce at similar times. The job segregation of women has nothing to do with their role in the home. It is sometimes argued that women’s jobs reflect motherhood and housework. But canning peas can in no way be seen as an extension of the sort of things women do in the home. Nor can the jobs of bank tellers, typists, filing clerks, telephonists, cashiers. (In offices, only the privileged elite secretaries play the role of surrogate wife to the (male) managers – the mass of clerical workers certainly do not.)

Neither has the present recession had the effect of driving women wholesale out of the workforce. Hartmann claims that “It is symptomatic of male dominance that our unemployment was never considered a crisis. In... the 1930s, the vast unemployment was partially dealt with by excluding women from all kinds of jobs – one wage job per family, and that job was the man’s.”<sup>12</sup>

This is simply wrong. A study of US labour in the period 1930-40 shows that more women entered wage labour in that decade than in any other in American history.<sup>13</sup> This was despite the rhetoric of some men including trade union bureaucrats like

Samuel Gompers, and was a reflection of the impact of the crisis. Similarly in Germany in the great slump, although all the parties (except the Communists) were for married women giving up their jobs, the female proportion of the total workforce rose between 1928 and 1932 from 35.3% to 37.3% – and this was due to increased working by married women.<sup>14</sup> As men were thrown out of the traditional industries, women were forced onto the labour market at whatever price.

A similar tendency can be seen today. Of course this doesn't mean that capital has become pro-women and anti-men. But what it does mean is that capital will use the ideology of women's place being in the home to enforce low wages, poor union organisation and inferior conditions. The question the theorists of patriarchy have to answer is this – if capital and men are indeed in alliance why are women not being thrown out of work and replaced by unemployed miners, steelworkers and dockers?

## **Is the family unchanging?**

The common contention to all theories of patriarchy is that male domination has remained the same, regardless of other changes in society. Thus patriarchy endures and the struggle against it is something apart from the struggle against capitalism. In the biological theories, the problem is reduced to that of the differences of men from women. Logically the solution is the eradication or removal of these creatures. These arguments are fairly easy to dismiss and have little influence in Britain at any rate.

More influential are the sorts of arguments put across by people like Hartmann, who see capitalism and patriarchy as two different forces that ally against women. She tells us that "Marxists... underestimated the strength of pre-existing patriarchal social forces with which fledgling capital had to contend and the need for capital to adjust to these forces".<sup>15</sup> But this assumes that the old pre-capitalist family passed intact into capitalism, without changing. And as such it is part of her more general argument that within class society there are two forms of production – labour and the family. One involves a mode of production, the other a mode of reproduction. She justifies this claim with a quote from Engels' first preface to *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*<sup>16</sup>: "The determining factor in history is... the production and reproduction of immediate life... on the one side, the production of the means of existence, of food clothing and shelter and the tools necessary for that production on the other side the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species. The social organisation under which people of a particular historical epoch live is determined by both kinds of production."

She sees the two “modes” as equally important (criticising Marxists for referring to economic production as the mode) and she argues that “there appears to be no necessary connection between changes in the one aspect of production and changes in the other.”<sup>17</sup> In other words each “mode” of production can change independently of the other. Capitalism can be abolished while patriarchy remains intact.

Marxists have always argued something quite different from this. Engels, in his preface to *Origins of the Family*, goes on to say that as class society develops it is less and less the case that the two modes co-exist and that what arises is “a society in which family relations are entirely subordinated to property relations.”<sup>18</sup> As capitalism develops as a world system, a totality, it envelops and changes all pre-capitalist structures, including the family.

The nature of the family is transformed. It could hardly be otherwise. It could not have survived the transition from feudalism to capitalism without changing fundamentally. For this transition was not something peaceful but a revolutionary upheaval in people’s lives. It meant the destruction of the old ways of life, of the old forms of domestic production, of the situation where women were dependent on the man in the family for their livelihood, and its replacement by generalised wage labour. Of course the family endures through history in the sense that the reproduction of life continues. The biological process remains the same. But the social relations of production change completely. Each new form of family is recreated by the ruling class to serve its own needs. And the new family created by capitalism cannot exist independently of the capitalist mode of production.

To suggest otherwise is to deny that material conditions can change ideas or structures of society. Sheila Rowbotham makes the same mistake when she argues that the capitalist family contains elements of feudal forms of production and so is a “mode within a mode”.<sup>19</sup> Yet vestiges of pre-capitalist society that endure within capitalism do not remain at all the same as previously. The monarchy is a remnant of feudal society but has been so totally transformed by capitalism that it bears really little relation to its previous role. So with the family. It may look the same (although even that is dubious) but its role and functions, its foundations have been transformed by capital. Reproduction through the family is not a separate mode, but part of the superstructure of capitalism. Abolition of the capitalist system – a revolutionary overthrow of society – means that the capitalist system of reproduction, the family, cannot survive intact.

Hartmann claims that “a society could undergo transition from capitalism to socialism for example, and remain patriarchal”<sup>20</sup>. But it couldn’t. For with the abolition of class society, the socialisation of childcare and housework would mean

that the material base of the capitalist family would be destroyed. That isn't to say that there will be no problems the day after the revolution. The problems facing the Russian working class when they did try to do these things were immense. Revolution and civil war had a massive impact on the lives of men and women. Ultimately the revolution was lost through the failure of the working class in the advanced capitalist countries to follow the Russian lead. That in its turn led to severe setbacks to the position of women. But in the early years they saw the glimmers of opportunity of equal work, socialised housework and a much freer sexuality which was made possible by the revolutionary overthrow of the old society.

The fact that women's oppression manifestly exists in the so-called socialist countries is not evidence of patriarchy. On the contrary it is evidence of the non-existence of socialism. No wonder that a society based on accumulation is not willing to allow any spending on the socialisation of childcare. Instead the burden on women is as great as in the West. True, nurseries are often said to be widely available, but the most widespread form of childcare in Russia is the grandmother, or child-minder, which of course requires no capital investment on the part of the capitalist class – a familiar story? It is theoretical acceptance of these countries being somehow better than Western capitalism that leads to acceptance of theories of patriarchy: if women are manifestly unequal there, this must be the fault of men, rather than of the economic system.

The family, the system of reproduction, is not a historical given but changes with the development of the forces of production. Not only that. Within capitalism the family has not remained constant either.<sup>21</sup>

The pre-capitalist family was destroyed by the rise of capitalist relations of production which created a class of propertyless free wage labourers. This in turn created at least the potential of the equalisation of relations between men and women. This is what Engels pointed to in his controversial writings on the subject. In early capitalism, before the predominance of the factory system, the outworking system meant that both sexes could act as joint producers. It would be wrong to idealise this period as it clearly wasn't a golden age in any sense but it did give women a relative freedom from the previous degrees of sexual and economic control by men. But the rise of the factory system meant not just that the individual wage labourer no longer controlled his or her work, but that the whole system of reproduction of the working class was put into jeopardy, as was so clearly demonstrated by Marx and Engels.<sup>22</sup>

Hence the improvement in living standards, protective legislation and the family wage. These were in the interests of capital, but it is also true that the working class of both sexes welcomed the move away from the factories by women.

Since the second world war the family has changed drastically yet again. Women's increased role in the workforce, coupled with greater ability to control our bodies (contraception, legal abortion), has developed a whole new number of attitudes. Marriage is not on the decline, but the number of divorces is increasing dramatically. Women and men are not rejecting the institution of marriage, but no longer feel it has to be for life. Control over reproduction and a degree of economic independence for women means more than one partner (or none at all-witness the growth of single parent families) becomes an option.<sup>23</sup>

Childbirth rates in virtually every advanced capitalist country (including Eastern Europe) have dropped dramatically, an indication that where women have a choice, it is not to spend their lives in childbirth. Migration is also a feature of late capitalism. As old industries decline, workers within the advanced capitalisms are forced to leave their families to seek work. As certain industries expand, workers from Southern Europe and Asia are brought to the industrial heartlands to fill the demand for cheap, pliable labour. Such movement has huge effects on traditional ideas, including ideas of the family. Yet the family remains a stifling, stultifying place where attitudes and roles are taught and learned, where prejudices and values are transmitted through the generations. It changes to fit the needs of capitalism but doesn't disappear. It will take an upheaval outside the family to begin to achieve that.

## **What keeps the family going?**

So what keeps the family going today? If we don't accept that it is the material interest of men, then what is it? Its existence depends upon two fundamental factors, although there are many subsidiary things involved as well.

First we have to look at the economic interests of capital in maintaining the family. The role the family plays in reproducing the existing workforce and the next generation of workers has been amply documented.<sup>24</sup> The existence of the family wage (even if today it barely covers the reproduction of the family and needs to be supplemented by state benefits and by women's mainly part time work) and unpaid labour in the home allow the costs of reproduction to be borne very cheaply.

If the system were capable of sustained economic expansion over many decades, then, hypothetically, the economic functions of the family could be replaced by other mechanisms. As Irene Bruegel has demonstrated conclusively, it would be

possible for the system to increase total surplus value if most (if not all) housework and child care were carried out by capitalistically organised paid labour, 'freeing' all women to produce value and surplus value for capital.<sup>25</sup> But to reorganise reproduction in this way would involve massive expenditure on investment in new childcare facilities and probably a complete restructuring of the housing stock. This is not something which is going to be undertaken in the present crisis ridden phase of the system – especially since the reserve army of the unemployed is amply large enough for the system's likely labour needs.

And so women are left with the responsibility for childbirth and childcare. This above explains why the family and women's oppression continue. Women's roles as mothers and childrearers structure their whole lives. Part-time working is a product of their role as mothers. Unequal and generally low pay is a product of them not being considered as breadwinners. From the beginning of their lives in capitalist society, the assumption is that they are going to be something different from men. Their pinnacle of achievement is presented as motherhood and marriage.

Theoretically there is no reason why women should care for children and perform the bulk of the housework, just because they give birth to children. But in a world of privatised reproduction, of a rigid sexual division of labour, where jobs are not paid at the same rate as men's, for most families there is really no alternative. It 'makes sense' for the woman to be the one to stay at home, and so the circle continues.

Talk of sharing housework, of men taking on the role of 'housewife' in such a world are only possible for a tiny minority of people where the woman has a profession or skill which enables her to earn as much or more than the man. Even then the ideas of a society which is based on women's inequality are difficult to combat. For the mass of workers such role sharing is pure utopianism.

The material significance of the family for capitalism is reinforced by ideological considerations. I don't mean by this that capitalists are male chauvinists who want to keep women inferior to men (although they usually are). Rather, the family provides some of the ideological cement that holds the system together.

At every stage in its development the system has had to establish structures that bind those that it exploits to it. These continue to exist at later stages in its development when its own economic dynamic demands new structures. The family is integrated into a complex network of such structures. These take advantage of the way housewives, isolated in the home and cut off from the wider collectivities that form around industrial production, are more susceptible to unchanging ideas about 'one's place in society'; dependent upon their husbands for a livelihood they can be persuaded that any sort of social change is a threat to their family and their

security. Or, again, these structures rely on the way the male worker, having to worry about the security of his wife and children as well as himself personally, is likely to think twice before getting involved in a strike, occupation or insurrection. The slogan of 'defence of the family' becomes a slogan for mobilising working people in defence of the status quo. So even when capitalism no longer directly needs some element in the structures associated with the family in the past (for instance, it no longer needs anti-abortion legislation now that it does not look to an army many millions strong to defend itself against its rivals) it only abandons that element under enormous pressure. For it cannot afford to damage structures, that however marginal to its central economic interests, help bind workers to present day society.

Again, hypothetically, given unlimited economic expansion for a long period of time, the system could develop new ideological structures to replace those identified with preservation of the present family. But that is not the condition in which the system finds itself. Today it clings to any means of support it can find - which is why in Southern Italy or Northern Ireland it has not been able to dispense with archaic structures like the Mafia or the Orange Order. It is even less likely to contemplate abandoning a structure, like the family, which continues to provide it with certain economic services.

The Marxist theory of the family tries to explain women's continued oppression in the context of women's role as childbearer and rearer. Hartmann claims that Marxism is 'sex-blind'; in other words can explain why people are in certain places but cannot explain why these people are women. Yet the theory does precisely that. It locates women's oppression historically, or locates its continued existence in the individual responsibility for reproduction, which in turn structures the whole of women's lives. It also puts a solution to that problem in terms of a socialism which would begin to break down both the material conditions which create women's oppression, and the ideas which have arisen from them – ideas with which we are so familiar, about the family and childcare being natural, women in the home being natural. It can do so by switching responsibility for childcare from the individual to society as a whole. That on its own would open up a new world for millions of women and allow us to behave as equals in a new society.

## **Conclusion**

Theories of patriarchy are not in fact theories of women's liberation. Instead of starting with an assessment of the material position of women in capitalist society, they start with crude biological assessments of the positions of men and women. They point no way forward for women's liberation. Why then have they become so

popular? Here we have to look very briefly at how the women's movement has developed since the late sixties.

The women's movement started in the late sixties as the result of women's changing role in society. Women's entry into the workforce, and increased control over contraception, meant that women had new ideas about their role, their careers, their aspirations. Such ideas were fed upon and developed by a massive expansion of higher education, which, although it discriminated against women in many areas, meant that for the first time women were able to enter relatively well paid, professional jobs with at least nominally equal pay. For most women this was a huge advance on the lives of their mothers and grandmothers.

But old ideas about women lagged behind reality. True, ideas about sex and sexuality changed, but the old view of woman as wife and mother still persisted. All sorts of legal anomalies meant that women were often treated as little better than children when it came to buying goods on hire purchase or obtaining mortgages. Advertising still portrayed an idealised view of women in the home which bore little contact with reality.

It was out of the conflict between this economic and social reality and the old ideals that ideas of women's liberation sprang. Women somehow felt that they were as good as any man and the reality of their lives was that they were indeed usually doing more than most men, being burdened in the home as well.

In the early years of the women's movement, the feeling was that everything not only could change but was changing. The aftermath of 1968 left a large radicalised layer open to the ideas of the women's movement. Many of the ideas put forward by women inside the women's movement (overwhelmingly the educated professionals) struck a chord with working class women. Changes in consciousness are difficult to measure, but a quick glance at the mass circulation women's magazines *Woman* and *Woman's Own* over the last fifteen years will show the extent to which sex, unemployment, tampons and many other social issues are dealt with alongside the usual features on film stars and the royal family. There was always a huge gap between the women's movement and working class women, and little contact between the two but at least the women's movement talked about organising in the working class.

Today things are rather different. The lack of general economic struggles of the last five years and the lack of political confidence within the working class has resulted in widespread demoralisation among sections of those radicalised in the 60s and early 70s. The women's movement appears to have suffered this particularly acutely. Now the pages of *Spare Rib* are not where you will find out about the latest



strikes involving women, but rather where you can reflect on whether celibacy is your personal answer to the problem of sleeping with men. The latest abortion campaign against Corrie would never have sustained itself had it not been for socialist organisations and the (often male) trade union movement. An occupation by 200 women at Lee Jeans has been largely ignored by the women's movement.

The feeling is that nothing can be done, so all we can do is sort out our own ideas. Consequently, arguments about changing the whole of society are replaced by exhortations to change our own lifestyles. Instead of activity we are confronted with an abstract moralism which demands that the small number of men (and women) who accept the ideas of women's liberation purge themselves of 'deviations' as a substitute for changing society. The logic is that if we change the attitudes of men we can change the world – as though it were men, not capitalism, which is the problem. It is from these ideas that the theory of patriarchy has developed and which now in turn reinforces these ideas.

As I have said it in no way points us forward to how we liberate ourselves. Instead it demands theoretical correctness from the few while accepting inaction by the many. Some women today are taking the theory to its conclusion and arguing for separate lifestyles within capitalism – separate homes, single sex schools, separate social lives. Not only do these 'solutions' fail to see the connection between material being and consciousness, and how that consciousness changes, but they are also profoundly elitist. They assume a certain level of income, which means a certain level of housing and a certain choice about where one lives, sends ones children to school and so on. For most women the choice simply isn't there. When Hartmann talks about the divorce rate evening up between the classes, she doesn't consider how miserable life was for women and men of the working classes who for generations couldn't divorce. Even today where divorce is relatively simple to obtain, there must be hundreds of thousands of couples who stay together out of material constraint (they can't afford two mortgages, the council will not rehouse if one leaves the marital home, there is virtually no cheap private accommodation). For the mass of the working class, such solutions are simply Utopian and we should treat them as such.

We should not just reject the theory of patriarchy and all the idealist talk which accompanies it, we have to assert that as Marxists we have a theory of women's liberation which can be achieved and which can lead to the liberation of the whole of humanity from capitalist exploitation and alienation. To do so we have to reject the notion underlying the theories of patriarchy, of the little woman analysis, which as Joan Smith describes, pictures 'women at the hearth, men on the battlefield'.<sup>26</sup> This is a picture which was never really true of whole sections of the working class, and in fact was based much more on the family of 'The banker, the middle

manager, the industrialist and their clerks and skilled workers' than it was on the family of 'the casual labourer, the handyman and the immigrant worker'.<sup>27</sup>

If it wasn't true then, today it is a manifestly absurd view of women. The typical woman today works in waged labour for the majority of her adult life. Typically she leaves work for the period until her children attend school and then goes back to fulltime work. Even 20% of women with children under 5 work usually part time. The full time housewife is a myth when 40% of the workforce are women and where women are entering work at a faster rate than men. Women are also joining trade unions at a much faster rate than men.

The myth has a number of advantages for capital. It enables them to foist poor wages, conditions and hours on women. It makes women feel that their job is not their 'real' work which makes them less likely to organise at work, and more likely to acquiesce to unemployment. It promotes the double burden of waged and housework for women. But it is nonetheless, a myth.

When we look at women as workers and not as isolated housewives, our response becomes different. We see that women as part of the class organised in workplaces can build the cohesion and confidence to challenge and eventually overthrow capitalism. That has to be our aim, and in the process of building a revolutionary party which can lead the class to overthrow capitalism we have to have a picture of the class which contains women as an integral part of the workforce. But, it is usually argued, this doesn't solve the problem that men are sexist even in the party and even after the revolution. No one could deny this was true. But our solution to it depends on whether we see fighting sexism as something separate from class struggle, or as an integral part of it. If it is the latter than our strategy cannot be for an autonomous movement separate from the party. We have to make the party and the socialist revolution reflect women's aspirations and demands as part of the demands of the class. That means recognising the reality of women's oppression, which often makes it harder for women to get involved at all levels of political life, and which puts on them the double burden of childcare and housework, as well as waged work.

To try to overcome this disadvantage which all women suffer, we need special mechanisms, a women's paper, meetings, attempts to get women party members to take an active and leading part in all aspects of our work. All these recognise the real problems that women have, and also attempt to overcome them in a material way, not by exhortation. What is clear is that concessions to any theory of patriarchy, or to the idea that men are the enemy, are not only inoperable but point to the wrong problem, to the manifestations of society rather than to its root.

Socialist revolution, the abolition of class society, alone provides an answer to how we win our liberation.

## NOTES

1 Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, London 1975.

2 Sally Alexander and Barbara Taylor, 'In Defence of Patriarchy', *New Statesman* January 1980.

3 *German Ideology*, Moscow 1964, p35.

4 Roberta Hamilton, *The Liberation of Women*, London 1978, pi 1.

5 Christine Delphy, *The Main Enemy*, WRRRC, 1977.

6 Heidi Hartmann, 'The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism', *Capital and Class*, no 8, Summer 1979.

7 Ibid

8 Marx *Capital*, vol 1, London 1976, p 517.

9 Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Moscow 1973; Marx, *Capital*, vol 1, London 1976, p 521.

10 Hartmann, op. cit.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Ruth Milkman, 'Women's work and economic crisis: some lessons of the Great Depression', *Review of Radical Political Economy*, 1976.

14 Helen Brak in Bessel and Feuchtwanger *Social Change and Political Development in Weimar Germany*, London 1981, ppl62-3.

15 Hartmann, op. cit.

16 Engels, *The Origins of the Family*, Moscow nd.

17 Hartmann, op. cit.

18 Engels, op. cit. This is a point ignored by Hartmann. It was also ignored by Joan Smith when she tried to develop an analysis based upon the two 'modes' (IS [old series] 100).

19 Sheila Rowbotham, *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World*, London 1973.

20 Hartmann, op. cit.

21 The arguments I have presented owe a great deal to the excellent article by Johanna Brenner 'Women's Self-Organisation, A Marxist Justification, Against the Current', New York, Fall 1980.

22 Marx, Capital, vol 1, London 1976. Engels, Conditions of the Working Class, op. cit.

23 Hartmann dismisses the increased divorce rate as simply an evening up between classes. Even if that were true why should it happen now? Because for the first time working class women have more chance of doing what upper class women have always been able to do: they have some degree of economic independence – however miserable – and are not tied to an exhausting life of childbirth and fear of pregnancy. (It is interesting to remember that in all the recent abortion campaigns one of our major and most successful arguments has been that working class women are only getting because of the 1967 Act what rich women always had— safe legal abortions.)

24 In particular the discussion in IS (old series) 100,104 and IS (new series) 1 and 3 between Joan Smith and Irene Bruegel.

25 Irene Bruegel, 'What Keeps the Family Going?', IS (new series) 1.

26 Joan Smith, 'Women's oppression and Male Alienation' IS (new series) 3.

27 Ibid

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**Course: No Woman, No Revolution**

**14081, Theories of Patriarchy, by Lindsey German, 1981**

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